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No. 16

An Essay

on

Amenorrhea

by

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of Brunswick, Virginia

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The subject on which I am about to found my inaugural dissertation, is one with which every Physician ought to be well acquainted, but knowing my inability to render it justice, I must content myself to repeat that which has been said before me. The disease is Amenorrhea or Suppression of the menses, one which involves the health & happiness of that noble creature woman; for, while labouring under this affection, she is an entire stranger to both. Before entering on the description of the disease, I think it will not be misplaced to say something on the causes & nature of the discharge, which qualifies woman for procreation, and without which, she is not capable of performing the great duties assigned to her by Nature. With regard to the causes of this periodical discharge, they are shrouded by so thick a curtain of obscurity, & their investigation is attended with such momentous difficulties, that in

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the prosecution of this subject, we have not a sufficient power of evidence to conduct us over the ardaous mound which divides the twilight region of probability, from the more luminous realm of demonstration and certainty. —

To submit a few remarks on the sentiments of those, who have turned their attention to the menstrual operation, may not be deemed irrelative to my subject, & especially, it may be necessary to premise a few observations on the signs & phenomena which precede & accompany this evolution. It is highly problematical, whether there be in the vegatable or animal kingdoms, any natural operation in which there is so remarkable a revolution, as that, to which a young maid is subject, at the period of pubescence. Almost the whole body is changed. The universal form of the virgin becomes more soft & winning, the uterus enlarges, the marks of puberity appear, the bosom evalves, the countenance is more

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beautiful, the eyes sparkle, the step, the carriage, & the speech, in short, all is grace & elegance. The time at which the menstruous action takes place, is not the same in every individual. It varies according to climate, conditions of life, & various other causes. Girls in the warm regions are pubescent sooner, those in the cold later. The same is also true of the eruption of the menstrual fluid. This change is said to occur with the girls of Asia so early as the eighth or ninth year & they become mothers before they have completed their tenth. The girls of Britain, enjoying good health passes this function about the fourteenth year of their age. At this epoch they are more or less annoyed by unusual languidness, & weariness, a disposition to yawn, pains of the loins, of the stomach, & of the head, giddiness, inclination to vomit, & sometimes actual vomiting; tumefaction and at times pains of the breasts, & other

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But should any impediment oppose its passage, through the uterus at this time, it has been observed to have some vicarious discharge, either from the nose, the lungs, the stomach, the fundament, the eyes, the gums, the nipples, the navel, or other unusual parts. This discharge of red fluid is proper to women during a considerable part of life, & is very necessary to the maintenance of health. It occurs monthly, the periods of gestation being excepted, at which time it very rarely takes place, but instances have been furnished, when this monthly discharge has regularly occured during the whole time of gestation. But these are very rare and are always to be considered as morbid. This menstrual fluid from the period at which it first flows returns periodically, every month, & continues at each return about from

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Exciting causes of the Menstrual fluid.

We meet with various & greatly different opinions, in the writings of Physicians, on the causes of the Menstrual operation. Indeed Physiologists have amused themselves with many conceits & visionary notions as well on the causes as on the effects of this operation. Some have traced the causes up to an imaginary influence of the moons and others have endeavoured to prove, that they resided in the qualities of the bile. But most of the moderns, who have treated of this matter, have attributed the causes, either to a local congestion of the blood vessels of the uterus, or to a general plethora of the whole body, or to an unequal evolution of the different parts of the body, or density of the arteries. But it is now pretty generally known & admitted to be a secretory action of the uterus, under peculiar

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Ovarian influence. It may not be considered inappropriate to mention a few of the reasons, by which, the advocates of this opinion might establish their sentiments. I shall first premise some observations in opposition to the conjecture of the menstrual operation being attributable to lunar influence. If the moon ruled in this affair, it is presumable that all women would be under the operation at the same time. This is not the fact, for at every period of lunation some one or other is under this operation. I would simply ask, Why does not the menstrual action take place before fourteen or fifteen or why does it cease after forty or fifty years? Seeing that the female is, during the whole time of life, equally exposed to lunar influence. But, other Physiologists, avoiding one extreme, have fallen into the other. The opinion advanced by some, that the menstrual operation derives its origin from too great a

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quantity or peculiar quality of the bile, rests upon ground as untenable & precarious as the sentiment above noticed. And to employ more time, concerning the incorrectness of those opinions would certainly be a waste of words. Another hypothesis touching the subject requires to be noticed. The menstrual operations, have been conceived to depend, on a congestion of blood in the uterine arteries. This is the only one of the older hypotheses, which is now at all entertained. "That there is an increased determination of blood, to the uterus, at the time ~~of~~ of menstruation, cannot be denied. But what does all this prove? Every gland, when excited by its appropriate stimulus, becomes the centre of plexus towards which blood is directed. This is common to all the secretory organs, though it is more strikingly observable in those called into action periodically. As the secretions are produced out of materials

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supplied by the blood; the effect is indeed absolutely necessary to the due performance of the function, and, so far, the hypothesis is well founded. But were this topical accumulation the only circumstance in the process of menstruation, the discharge would be pure blood, which it is not confessedly. Glands require for the exercise of their secretory office to be excited by some specific impression. The testicle is stimulated by lascivious desires to the elaboration of semen, & the uterus in the same way, is called into action by an impression derived from the ovaries. That the latter is the true, is sufficiently proved by the fact, that where these organs are wanting or much diseased, a retention or suppression of the menses uniformly happens. The blood discharged in menstruation, says Mr Hunter is neither similar to blood taken from a vein of the same person nor to that extravasated by any accident

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in any other part of the body. But, it is a species of blood, changed, seperated, or thrown off from the common mass by an action of the uterine vessels, in a process similar to secretion, by which action, the blood having lost its vital principle does not coagulate. It differs from blood among other respects in the want of fibrin. That menstruation is a genuine secretory action of the uterus, is now pretty generally admitted. Of what does a gland consist except a congeries of blood vessels? Even the most perfect of the secretions are accomplished by this simple contrivance. If a few vessels "creeping through the coats of the stomach" can secrete the gastric liquor? Why may not the infinitely more glandular organization of the uterus elaborate the menstrual fluid? Since the blood says Haller" is brought to the uterus in greater quantity & more quickly through its lax & ample arteries, & on account of the rigidity

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and narrowness of the veins, it returns with difficulty; What could have been this wise provision of nature but for the purpose of secretion? But if the menstrual flux be not attributable to the influence of the moon, or to the bile, or a fermentation of the blood, or to a fullness of the body; from what cause does it arise? From what causes proceeds the secretion of semen in the spermatic vessels? Assuredly from the impregnating capacity of the testicles. In the same manner, also, does the menstrual action depend on a condition of the ovaries to be impregnated. Hence this flux is to be received as a secretion from the uterine arteries, acting in obedience to an excitement derived from a matured condition of the Ovaries. From these facts, it is very clear in my estimation, that the menstrual action cannot be refered to any other cause, than a genuine secretory action of the uterus, dependant on the Ovaries, as a source of excitement,

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and in confirmation of it, the circumstance of the young woman from whom Percival Pott by mistake removed the Ovaries, might be adduced. Antecedant to the operation, this young woman had her menstrual operations regularly & at each time copiously, but after this unhappy affair, her breasts wasted away & all the phenomena attendant on those periods disappeared & never afterwards returned. I shall now commence the history of Amenorrhea, but shall entirely confine my remarks to the division of it, Suppression of the menses — It is to be considered as of two kinds. The one where the menses do not begin to flow about the time they generally appear & the other, where after having made their appearance, they cease to return at their usual periods from other causes than conception. The term of retention or Emansio menseum has been applied to the former, that of suppression to the latter, which I shall only notice in this essay.

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those which may be properly considered as cases of suppression, are such as occur after the flux has been established for sometime, ~~in its~~ regular course, and in which the interruption cannot be referred to the causes of retention, but must be imputed to some resistance in the blood vessels of the uterus. Accordingly we often find the suppression occasioned by cold, fear, anxiety of mind, inactivity of body, & other causes, which may produce a constriction of these extreme vessels. Some have supposed an obstructing lentor of the fluids to occasion the resistance now mentioned, but this is purely hypothetical, without any proper evidence of the fact, and it is besides from other considerations improbable. There are indeed some cases of suppression that seem to depend upon a general debility of the system and consequently of the vessels of the uterus. Symptoms. — Heaviness, listlessness to motion, fatigue on the least

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exercise, palpitations at the heart, sometimes pains in the head, but always in the back, loins & hips, flatulency & acidities in the stomach and bowels, costiveness, which induces, says Dr Hamilton, the feculent odour of the breath, disordered stomach, depraved appetite, and impaired digestion, which preclude a sufficient supply of nutriment, at a period of growth when it is most wanted, cessation of the menses, a preternatural appetite for chalk, lime, and various other absorbents, together with dyspeptic symptoms, which generally attend on this disease. As it advances in its progress, the face becomes pale or assumes a yellowish hue, the whole body is emaciated, flaccid, & likewise pale. The feet & legs are affected with Oedematous swellings, the breathing is much hurried by any vigorous exertion of the body, the pulse is quick, but small; & the person is apt to be affected with many of the symptoms of hysteria. Sometimes a great quantity of pale urine is discharged.

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It is very common to meet with cases of suppression where the pulse is active, the habit plethoric, flushed face, inflamed eyes, accompanied by pain in the back & head, with acute or heavy uncomfortable sensations of fullness in different parts of the body. It is very frequently found in cases of long standing, that there is considerable derangement of the liver. From the number of cases which I have seen and from the practice requisite to the radical cure of such cases I am inclined to think such to be the fact. When treating these cases the remedies were directed to the liver as well as the uterus. Prognosis —

Our prognostic in this disease is to be directed by the cause which has given rise to it, the length of time it has continued, and the state of the persons health in other respects. When suddenly suppressed by cold, it may be removed by pursuing the proper means; but where the suppression has been of long standing, & leucorrhea attend, we ought always to consider

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such cases as unfavourable. In those cases which have terminated fatally, in consequence of the long continuance of the disease, on dissection, the ovaria and uterus appear to be in a morbid state. —

Treatment. Connected as Amenorrhea is, very often, with an exceedingly debilitated state of the system, the case will be found to be most advantageously managed, at least in the commencement, by the cold bath, exercise, change of air, generous diet, and by some of the tonics as Bark, and some of the preparations of steel. Nor is it unusual to unite with the preceding medicines, the fœtid gums, but they seem to be inert. Where the suppression depends on a constricted state of the uterine vessels, we may attempt the removal of it by determining the blood into them more copiously; by purging, by the exercise of walking, by friction, by warm bathing of the lower extremities. The action of the uterine vessels may be excited, by the application of

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stimulants. Thus those purgatives which particularly stimulate the rectum may also prove stimulant to the uterine vessels, connected with those of the rectum. For purgatives most proper in this disease are those of a drastic nature, as Aloes, Gamboge, Scammony, &c given in suitable doses, and at such times, as the practitioner may deem necessary. A strong infusion of Senna constitutes a very useful remedy in this disease. For awakening the action of the uterine vessels, other remedies, not of a purgative quality, are highly recommended in this complaint. These may be divided into external & internal. The external are blisters on the Os Sacrum or on the inside of the thighs, as near the groins, as possible, and warmth applied to the pudenda in the form of steam or cloths, wet with water, as hot as the patient can bear it. To this head belongs Electricity, which is a very useful application, passed through the region of the uterus,

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and the lumbar region generally. The internal are, the Savin in powder or Tincture, Tincture of Myrrh, and the Radix Senaka in powder or decoction. If there be any Emmenagogue power in any medicine, in the whole catalogue, it must be the last named. I have seen it used in a great many cases and almost always with a happy affect. "Nor is it uncommon to meet with suppression of the menses, where the pulse is active, the habit plethoric, a flushed face, inflamed eyes, pains in the back, and loins". No one would hesitate to have recourse to the lancet, as the most prompt & effectual remedy. While it opens, as it were, the secretory actions, it obviates the danger which is too apt to ensue from vicarious discharges determined either to the brain, lungs or some other vital part. Nor should we neglect as auxiliary means, to have access to active purgatives, as operating on the large intestines, which lie in the

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vicinity of the uterus. The various preparations of Aloes combined either with calomel or Myrrh have been much celebrated. Aloes always displays active Emmenagogue properties. With the same view of causing a determination to the parts, the daily use of a Semicupium of warm bath water has been prescribed, to be continued for half an hour at a time and spinning at a small wheel. Amenorrhea as I have before said, is very frequently attended with hepatic derangement, & when this is the case purgatives should be exhibited daily, blood should be taken from the arm every two or three days, & Calomel exhibited once or twice a week. The bleedings should be small & frequent, besides Sulph. Magnesia is to be given in small doses throughout the day and sometimes other cathartics should be used. This practice persisted in for some length of time, has entirely cured

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patients who have laboured under a suppression of the menses for some considerable time previous. There is one remedy used in this disease, which I have not mentioned in this I have never seen used, but from its high authority I cannot pass it over. It is the Volatile Tincture of Guaiac of Dr Davies. Emetics are very serviceable in this complaint. Diet should be light & nutritious, exercise moderate, warm clothing, and above all the patients feet should never be exposed to cold & wet ground.

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